

Going north and west from the shortgrass country toward New Mexico, each year more landmarks disappear. Hard to spot a familiar gate, or a faded sign lettered in branding paint, tearing along on a four-lane highway at 70 miles per hour. Difficult to pick up the monument on a hill old man so-and-so erected after World War One to honor "the Cause," or where mister such-and-such and his wife built a red stone ranch house walled two feet thick, reinforced with tempered steel and special mortar.

Also, so much land lies sub-divided and plowed into fields that ranch history lies desecrated by red and blue buntings strung on slanted ropes and blighted by greasy tractor sheds and long rows of cropland. Now and then, a county lane brings back long-ago bull buying expeditions, or dropping off a mare of the Boss's to be bred.

But verbalizing such a litany is hard to transmit surrounded by racing Volkswagens sending a lube oil haze to the skies, and clattering diesel rigs smoking the road with soot.

When greatest of great-grandfathers rode northwest from Angelo to the Llano Estacado in the 1870s to buy cattle from his friend Charles Goodnight, he might have passed a few homesteaders' garden plots of broken ground,

but he sure didn't see any sub-divisions. We only have record of one trip, left by one of his daughters. She wrote: "Daddy said on the way up to Mr. Goodnight's, a drifter stopped at his camp for supper. Next morning, the fellow robbed his saddlebags while he cooked breakfast. Then he said the drifter's horse kept setting back tailed to a pack mule, but he wanted to find water before he turned the old pony loose." She concluded by writing, "Daddy wasn't much of a talker. Was kind to horses, and unforgiving of his enemies."

On my trip to New Mexico a week ago, I was short on new stories or a fresh audience. My traveling partner had already heard 10 times how Highway 87 paralleled a big Indian trail up the North Concho River. She knew the greatest of great-grandfather story as well as I did. Closest I came to new material was a quote from my old pal Horace Kelton's recent letter of a cowboy fishing a rusty Colt six-shooter from a dug well on his grandfather's ranch. I saved the tale to tell as we passed by his grandpa's old headquarters at Broome, Texas between Water Valley and Sterling City.

My opening showed a flair for drama. "You can't see the well from the road. (See how this builds interest? What well?) Trees also cover the tracks the stagecoach once made

up this long valley, attracting Robin Hood bandits to prey on the booty of the trade."

Hoping to spur her attention, I continued: "But one morning, Horace wrote, a cowboy fished a pearl-handled, silver-plated Colt from a dug well on the far hill. (A slight embellishment here to seed the idea that the pistol may have belonged to the infamous Old Mexico *bandido*, Marietta.) Caused quite a stir around the headquarters as the Broomes were still mighty sensitive to such evidence from a number of familial indiscretions committed back in Mississippi during the Reconstruction Era of the late 1860's. ("Bushwhacking Yankees" omitted to protect the guilty.)

At that time, however, Grandfather Broome passed on a code of the West that was to serve his grandson Horace through a long career as a Western novelist. He told him, "Boy, leave some questions alone."

I slowed down in case she wanted to go back for a better look at the hill. However, even breathing by a face covered with a newspaper is the worst rating a roadway guide can receive.

Given the chance, I could have shown her where Horace and his Uncle George Broome spilled a herd of weaned calves crossing the highway. I never was sure, but I always

thought I knew the pasture where Horace's horse fell, ending his cowboy career in a broken back. One part I am certain of is that his Uncle George stayed mighty sore at Horace for letting his horse fall and break the tree in a good R.J. Andrews saddle.

Reports continue to spread of oral historians taping oldtimers' tales. Out at Mertzon all that's ever taped is on recording machines hooked to a telephone. For the rest of the day, we played mystery book tapes. Next time Horace comes home from Costa Rica, I am going to request a revised description of the six-shooter the cowboy found in his grandpa's well. The closest Marietta ever raided was 900 miles south of Water Valley, but he might have made a *vuelta* through there just to see the scenery and dropped his pistol while mirroring his handsome reflection in the water well.